

2-1-1967

Iowa City --- Then and Now

Benjamin F. Shambaugh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shambaugh, Benjamin F. "Iowa City --- Then and Now." *The Palimpsest* 48 (1967), 81-88.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol48/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Iowa City—Then and Now

The growth of Iowa City in the decade before the Civil War was nothing short of phenomenal, the population soaring from 1,250 in 1850 to 5,214 in 1860. Most of this gain was made prior to 1857, the presence of the seat of state government, the beginning of classes in the State University of Iowa in 1855, and the arrival of the railroad on January 1, 1856, being highly conducive to attracting settlers. It should not be forgotten that the westward trek of the pioneers had caused the Iowa population to soar from 192,000 to 674,000 during this decade.

A number of factors combined to stifle the growth of Iowa City after 1857. The removal of the capital to Des Moines, the extension of the railroad westward beyond Iowa City, the closing of the newly born State University for lack of funds between 1858 and 1860, and the withering effects of the Panic of 1857 caused a temporary stagnation in business and industry. The outbreak of the Civil War led to an exodus of male volunteers from both the University and the city, leading to a further recession of business.

Despite the depressing influences, the *Iowa State Gazetteer* for 1865 was impressed with the growth of the Athens of Iowa during these War years. According to the *Gazetteer*:

The manufacturing establishments in the city and vicinity are six flouring mills, one candle, one soap, one oil, one rope and one broom factory. The Iowa River flows through the city affording an immense water power which is as yet but partially improved.

Churches.—One Baptist, two Methodist, one Christian, two Lutheran, one United Presbyterian, one Congregational, one Catholic, one Episcopalian, and one Universalist.

Libraries.—University and State Historical Society.

In addition to the above, the Masons were represented by two lodges, and the Odd Fellows and the Good Templars by three lodges each. The city had two newspapers—the *Iowa City Republican* with N. H. Brainard as editor, and the *State Press* edited by John P. Irish. The State Historical Society of Iowa was publishing the *Annals of Iowa* with Theodore S. Parvin as editor.

The same *Gazetteer*, unable to report an increase in college students because of the Civil War, stressed the increase in Academy students attending the University from 172 in 1860-61 to 434 in 1863-64. The *Gazetteer* records:

The University . . . occupies the elegant stone building erected for a State House, and a large four story brick

building, designed for public halls and lecture rooms. An additional building is in process of erection, at a contemplated cost of \$25,000, for which an appropriation of \$20,000 was made at the last session of the Legislature. This will embrace, besides a number of recitation rooms, a spacious chapel and an astronomical observatory. The site is a beautiful and commanding one, embracing an extensive campus highly ornamented with groves of native forest trees.

The annual income of the University, which was described as "munificently endowed" by the General and State Government, was \$20,000 and the assets, "including buildings, apparatus, etc.," were set at over \$300,000. Students were allowed access to the library "free of charge" and additions were made to it from time to time "by the liberality of the Trustees." Four Literary Societies were in "successful operation"—Zetaganthean, Erodelphian, Hesperian, and Irving Institute. Board in private families varied from \$2.00 to \$3.00 per week, but it was pointed out that "a number of students, by renting rooms and boarding themselves, could reduce the cost of board to less than one half the above amount."

Two features of life at the University a century ago are especially significant. Students of different sexes were "not expected to room in the same building." In addition, the Board of Trustees had abolished the tuition fees in all departments; but

each student, on entering the University, was required to pay in advance a matriculation fee of \$5.00 per session. This covered all the expenses for tuition, with the exception of \$10.00 per session for instruction in instrumental music.

The population growth of Iowa City between 1860 and 1870 was not commensurate with other Iowa cities, most of it occurring during the post Civil War period. *Holland's Iowa City Directory* for 1868-1869 was enthusiastic about the future prospects of Iowa City, particularly manufacturing:

Foremost among them stands the grain and flouring mills, of which the city has five, with an aggregate daily grinding capacity of 3,000 bushels. The oil factory of Close Bros. consumes yearly, 75,000 bushels of flax seed. Adjacent to the city is the village of Coralville, where is situated the most important manufacturing interests of Johnson County—the Home Woolen and Paper Mills of Close Bros. The former have a monthly capacity of 10,000 yards of cloth, and the latter turns out the best quality of wrapping and news paper. Besides the milling and oil interests in the city, we have foundries, pump shops, furniture factories, boot and shoe factories, blind and window curtain factories, breweries, &c., &c. The mention of all of which would extend this sketch far beyond the limits designed for its occupancy. Suffice it to say, that with upwards of *ninety* different manufacturing houses within her limits, the claim of Iowa City to future and solid prosperity is no idle one.

But there was more than the University or manufacturing to commend Iowa City to the prospective settler. The churches and homes of the Athens of Iowa were also worthy of special mention in *Holland's Directory*:

Among Iowa cities, none can produce finer public buildings. The group upon the University *campus*, combines at once, the solidity of architecture which characterized the edifices erected in "the early days," with the airy yet substantial workmanship, the product of more modern minds. The Congregational church at the corner of Clinton and Jefferson streets, patterned after the gothic style, is one of the most elegant church edifices in the West. And the Catholic Cathedral, at the corner of Jefferson and Linn streets, capable of seating 2500 persons, is superior to any structure of its kind west of the Mississippi. Not alone by its churches is Iowa City distinguished, for in the elegance of its private residences and the substantial massiveness of its manufacturing and business houses, it evinces the capacity it possesses for insuring for all time a continual prosperity.

The city contained such organizations as the Johnson County Medical Society (organized in 1856), the Johnson County Agricultural and Mechanical Society, and a Young Men's Christian Association. The foundation was firmly laid by 1870 for a stable but steady growth—a growth that is reflected by the federal census for each decade from 1850 to 1960.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>
1850	1,250	1910	10,091
1860	5,241	1920	11,267
1870	5,914	1930	15,340
1880	7,123	1940	17,182
1890	7,016	1950	27,212
1900	7,987	1960	33,443

The record growth of Iowa City since 1940 may be attributed to two factors—the inclusion of University students in the federal census beginning with 1950 and the addition of several fine industries with good, year-round employment, including Owens Brush (425), Proctor & Gamble (320), Sheller Manufacturing (258), Moore Business Forms (185), and Economy Advertising (88).

The first four of these have been established since the close of World War II while the last named dated its beginnings to the closing years of the 19th Century. The University enrollment alone has increased from 9,125 in 1950 to 17,755 in 1966. The population of Iowa City was 41,602.

The changes that a century has wrought in Iowa City have been tremendous. In 1856 Iowa City welcomed the iron horse with open arms; today the diesel engines of the Rock Island railroad link Iowa City with Chicago and Denver and points beyond. In 1881 the first telephones were installed in Iowa City; today there are 1,460 business main

lines and 14,300 residential main lines required to take care of the busy community. In 1867 only two University buildings stood on the campus square; today the University campus covers approximately 1,347 acres of ground and includes more than 60 beautiful buildings. In 1867 the valuation of University assets stood at \$300,000; today the property valuation has been set at \$107,350,000. In 1867 there were no separate colleges in the modern sense; today one can point to ten colleges.

The advantages afforded by Iowa City in 1967 are truly tremendous when compared with those offered its citizens a century ago. Excellent public and parochial schools prepare the student for further educational effort at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels at the University of Iowa. The variety of athletics—football, baseball, basketball, track, tennis, and golf—present a year-round festival for the sports enthusiast. For the intellectually and culturally inclined, who may be seeking stimulation as well as relaxation, the invitation is open to lectures, concerts and plays.

In addition to the above, it might be pointed out that modern highways make Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha, and Minneapolis easier of access in 1967 than the outlying communities in Johnson County were a century ago.

Religion has always played a significant role in

the story of Iowa City. Three churches—the First Presbyterian, Congregational, and St. Mary's Roman Catholic—still stand as mute reminders of the abiding faith of their founders a century and more ago. To these might be added some thirty churches in Iowa City and Coralville, many having built new homes since the close of World War II. From a handful of members in 1839, the First Methodist Church has grown to 2,300 in 1967.

The State Historical Society of Iowa has lived and grown with Iowa City and the University since its founding in 1857. It has recorded the history of the Hawkeye State in all its varied facets in almost 250 books and bound volumes of its periodicals. It has been guided through 110 years of its activities by a Board of Curators, a dedicated group of men and women who have given freely of their time and talents, to further its work. The membership of the Board of Curators has included such notable Iowans as James W. Grimes and Samuel Jordan Kirkwood, William Boyd Allison, and James (Tama Jim) Wilson, Josiah B. Grinnell, and scores of others. It is to honor two curators—William R. Hart and Ingalls Swisher—both long and useful residents of Iowa City and both faithful members of the Board, that this issue of *The Palimpsest* is dedicated.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN